



STATE OF WASHINGTON
WASHINGTON STATE BOARD OF HEALTH
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December 13, 2006

TO: Washington State Board of Health Members

FROM: Frankie Manning, Health Disparities Committee Chair

SUBJECT: INFANT MORTALITY AND HEALTH DISPARITIES

Background and Summary

Racial/ethnic disparities exist in infant mortality rates (IMR) in Washington State. According to combined data from 1995-2002, the average infant mortality rate (deaths per 1,000 children under age 1 year) in Washington is 5.6. But for American Indian/Alaska Natives the IMR is 8.9 and for Blacks it is 11.2 (twice the state average). These disparities have persisted over time, despite the fact that Washington's infant mortality rate has, on-the-whole, declined over the past decade. The causes of this trend are complex and multi-factored.

The three leading causes of infant death in Washington in 2001 were congenital anomalies, SIDS, and short gestation/low birth weight. In 2003, the singleton (one baby) low birth weight (LBW) rate was highest for African Americans. In fact, between 1990 and 2003, the singleton LBW among African Americans remained at twice the rate of whites.

Today we are going to have an opportunity to explore some of these issues in greater depth. We will learn more about infant mortality trends at national and state level, race and ethnic disparities, and some public health interventions. But we may want to return to this topic in future board meetings as the explanations for racial inequity in birth outcomes are very complex. There is not a single causal relationship between these birth outcomes and ethnicity. Often cigarette smoking, inadequate prenatal care, and maternal age are the explanations given for these disparities and these factors do contribute to low birth weight and infant mortality. These factors alone, however, do not account for the differences. According to the research, black-white differences in infant health persist regardless of socioeconomic position. For example, compared with their white peers, the children of college-educated Black women face a significantly greater risk of being low birth weight.

Recommended Board Action

No action recommended at this time.